

# Mystery in Normandy



Artist's rendition of Hawker Typhoon IB of 440 Sqn RCAF.

by Wally Ward

On a bright and sunny morning on July 31st 1944, my wingman – F/O John Lippert – and I, climbed into the single cockpits of adjacent Hawker Typhoons, adjusted oxygen masks and started routine checks. We had been briefed to fly – not for an operational target – but for an A&E (airframe and engine) test, as our aircraft had just completed a maintenance inspection.

Simultaneously each of us pressed our starter button. They responded like loud firecrackers as the cartridges fired and gave ignition to the massive 2,100-hp Napier Sabre engines.

Taxiing slowly from side-to-side because the nose blocked our vision ahead, we reached the end of the wire mesh runway of B.9 at Lantheuil, not far from Bayeux, Normandy. In formation, Lippert and I opened full throttle, were airborne, and raised our flaps and wheels. We then continued to gain altitude, flying in an easterly direction, soon reaching 10,000 feet. There was slight cloud below us but at our height the sky was clear. From the moment of take-off, of course, we never stopped moving our heads, checking below, above, and in every direction for enemy fighters.

After a few minutes I noticed that John Lippert was lagging behind, thereby losing visual contact. I throttled back, drew alongside and waved, but there was no response. Lippert was motionless, looking into the cockpit. So I broke radio silence and called him, but there was no reply. I then dropped under him, checking for any sign of damage – and then moved to the

opposite side. I was within 15 feet of him, and had a clear view, but nothing seemed out of order. Shortly thereafter, Lippert's Typhoon – in a shallow dive – began to lose altitude. I followed him down until he disappeared into cloud at about 2,000 feet.

John Lippert and I had been friends since we flew Kittyhawks back at Sea Island BC. Naturally I was upset and perplexed as to the cause of his disappearance. Thirty minutes after takeoff I was back and giving my report to our intelligence officer.

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This story does not end here and has an interesting sequel. In 2005 I was visiting the Canadian War Museum in Ottawa and out of curiosity opened the book *They Shall Grow Not Old* which lists all RCAF deaths during WW II. I was very surprised to read the cause of John Lippert's death was "shot down by enemy fighters." I believed that this statement was not only false but also gave an unfair negative portrayal of John Lippert.

My subsequent efforts to locate any of the 10 Lippert children – originally from Kitchener, Ont – was successful. I was able to locate a younger brother, Ronald – living in Florida. His story was certainly unusual.

After the war, Ron Lippert was a commercial pilot and owner of a small aviation

company. He had a lucrative contract flying food from Ottawa to Cuba in support of the Contras. All went well until an inspection revealed that the cargo was munitions – not food. Ronald was charged, convicted, and sentenced to be executed. Fortunately, Prime Minister Lester Pearson intervened and Fidel Castro reduced the sentence to 10 years' imprisonment. An account of his experience can be read in his two published books, *Spybate* and *Ten Years/ten days*.

When I asked Ronald about other members of his family, he told me about his sister, who after the war, went to Germany to study as an opera singer. Sometime later she returned to her parents' home to introduce her new husband Otto, a former Luftwaffe pilot!! (Angela)

At a gathering of former Typhoon pilots, I discussed the mystery of John Lippert's death in 1944. I was reminded of the difficulties in the early years of the Typhoon's development. There were two major problems: first, the tail section occasionally broke off and second, carbon monoxide from the engine sometimes seeped into the cockpit. The tail problem was eventually solved but not the poisonous gas. Lippert's aircraft may not have had the oxygen tank filled, and he would have lost consciousness. It is also possible that his aircraft was hit by anti aircraft fire as it neared the ground. We will never know. ▶

(Ed note: Wally Ward of Mississauga, Ont, went on to a long career as a teacher and school principal.)